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BLACK AFRICANS ON THE MARITIME SILK ROUTE *Jengi* in Old Javanese epigraphical and literary evidence

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a closer look at the history of black Africans in pre-Islamic Java. Though the presence of African slaves in Java before 1500 has for long been acknowledged by historians, hardly any research has been conducted on the subject. I use the epigraphical and literary evidence in Old Javanese as the major source, and contextualise it with much more comprehensive evidence on black Africans in Tang and Song China. Though it will not be possible to answer questions about African cultural practices, beliefs, or identity, given the extreme limitations of our sources, new knowledge can be gained about their interaction with the Javanese state and society. Like other maligned and marginal people, black Africans were invariably conceptualised as 'different others' in both Java and China. Infrequent literary representations suggest that some of them were integrated into the servile system of Javanese courts, and the epigraphical record indicates that black African slaves were occasionally given by rulers to religious institutions, probably as meritorious deeds. They also served as part of the administrative body of royal tax collectors, enjoying a relative freedom of movement in rural Java, benefits unseen in Song China, a polity from where we have the most comprehensive evidence on black African diaspora in pre-modern Asia.

KEYWORDS

Black Africans; diaspora; Java; pre-modern

Introduction: Black Africans in the epigraphical record

Since at least the 9th century Java was home for a small diaspora of Africans. The revelation of the existence of black Africans in pre-Islamic Java evokes a natural curiosity about the circumstances leading to their arrival there, and to the conditions under which they were held captive, lived, and died. The historical marginality of black Africans, however, is matched by their marginality in modern scholarship: the pioneering research of Ferrand (1919, 1922) and Pelliot (1959) on foreigners in the pre-modern Indo-Malay world showed the existence of black Africans in Sumatra and Java, but has not been expanded since in any substantial way. Scholars who have discussed the history of black Africans in pre-Islamic Indonesia have mostly accepted what was achieved by Ferrand and Pelliot, adding little to a confused picture. Major modern contributions are Piet Zoetmulder (1982), who collected references to black Africans in Old Javanese inscriptions and

literature, and Helen Creese (2004), who has discussed several passages pertaining to black Africans in Old Javanese court poetry. Apart from these achievements, and a useful discussion on the topic in Wheatley (1961), Wolters (1967, 1986), and Hall (2011), there is mostly silence. Even more surprisingly, black Africans of pre-modern Java have received no or only minimal attention from the specialists on the history of African diaspora; in fact, only Talib (1988: 731–3), drawing mostly on Ferrand (1919) and Wheatley (1961), has summarised what is known on black Africans from Chinese records. Even in a recently published volume *Uncovering the history of Africa in Asia* (Silva Jayasuriya and Angenot 2008), promoted as a ‘major achievement’ in the field, only fleeting attention is paid to the problem of African presence in pre-modern Indo-Malay world, without taking into account published Old Javanese sources.

This lack of scholarly attention is undoubtedly due to the very limited corpus of evidence on black Africans available to us. Yet, though fragmentary and offering only a restricted insight into their presence in Java, it may further our understanding of the shadowy intersections in the history of two disparate cultural zones – insular Southeast Asia and Africa before 1500. In fact, Song China and pre-Islamic Java are the only two regions in Asia for which we have at least rudimentary evidence on the presence of black Africans. Probably most interestingly, black Africans seem to have enjoyed better social position and living conditions in Java compared to China, as I demonstrate below. Don Wyatt (2010: 73), who has recently discussed in detail black Africans of Song China, concludes that their presence there was restricted almost exclusively to a single port city of Guangzhou, unlike in Java where epigraphical evidence indicates a wider presence of black Africans not only at ports and royal courts, but also in rural areas.

The available evidence suggests that the first black Africans arrived in the Indo-Malay world in the early part of the 8th century, if not earlier, most probably in very limited numbers (Talib and Samir 1988: 731). Comparative Chinese evidence, discussed in some detail below, indicates that they reached Śrivijaya, a maritime empire which had its centre in present-day Palembang in Sumatra, and by the 9th century also Mataram, the most powerful polity in Java, as sub-status people, probably from the far-reaching Arab export of slaves from East Africa. In 724, a black African girl was sent by Śrivijaya to China as part of a tribute consisting mostly of luxurious and rare merchandise (Ferrand 1922: 7–8; Pelliot 1959: 599). The earliest evidence pertaining to black Africans in Java may be a Chinese account that Kaliṇa sent between 813–818 black African boys and girls to Tang China (Wheatley 1961: 54).¹ We can only speculate about the actual numbers of Africans shipped to Asia in this early period; the total number, however, might have been substantial. Habib (1988: 732) posits that black Africans mentioned sporadically in Chinese texts and Old Javanese inscriptions represented ‘only part of the large group of African slaves imported into the region by Arab merchants’. Wink (1991: 14) estimates that between 850 and 1000, Arab slavers took almost 10,000 black slaves from Africa, exporting them ‘across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean to Islamic Asia and to India’. It is tempting to suggest that the unsuccessful revolt of black Africans in Iraq (869–883) may have triggered a flow of African slaves to India and beyond, but the evidence is inconclusive (Talhami 1977; Oseni 1989; Popovic 1999). How many of these

¹Kaliṇa refers to a political entity on Java, possibly identical with Ho-ling known to the Chinese in the 7th to 8th centuries (Hall 2011: 122).



slaves ended up in Southeast Asia and China, however, remains unknown. Between the 9th and 16th centuries, estimates by Collins (2006: 342) are that about seven million or some 9,000 slaves per year were taken out of Africa. At the peak of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean, in the 17th to 18th centuries, the numbers were, unsurprisingly, even larger (Campbell 2004). As demonstrated by Clarence-Smith (2015), the trade in black African slaves in the Indian Ocean region remained vigorous well into the 19th century.

Black Africans are denoted in Old Javanese epigraphical and literary record as *jəŋgi*, a term which is generally taken to represent a Persian loanword, usually traced to the form *zangi* (Bausani 1964; Jones 2007). Most scholars who have discussed Javanese black Africans have suggested that they had their origin specifically in and around Zanzibar, one of the East African islands (Zoetmulder 1982; Barret Jones 1984; Creese 2004; Worsley et al. 2013). This claim, however, is based on the simplification of linguistic evidence. The medieval Arabs, in fact, applied the name Zanzibar ('Region of the Blacks') to the wider area of the east African coast, extending from the river Juba in southern Ethiopia down to Cape Delgado, a coastal promontory on the border of Tanzania and Mozambique. Wyatt (2010: 8) has analysed in detail the black Africans of Guangzhou – people who had most probably the same geographic origin as Javanese *jəŋgi* – and concludes that they came predominantly from Somalia but also Kenya and possibly further south.

Our main source of evidence pertaining to black Africans in pre-Islamic Java are the so-called '*sīma* charters', administrative documents which record the transfer of tax and labour rights by a ruler or another highly placed tax authority to a specified beneficiary (Wissemann Christie 1993: 181).² In all cases known to us, black Africans documented in Old Javanese epigraphical record were sub-status people, either slaves or bonded servants. We can recognise two distinct, but obviously related, contexts in which black Africans figure. Most commonly, *jəŋgi* are simply listed among the *watāk i jro*, a category best rendered as 'court attendants', a group of servile persons attached to royal and princely courts.³ Zoetmulder (1982: 2207) claims that *watāk i jro* is identical to the category called *varga daləm* (or *varga i daləm*). The status of the two groups, and the relationship between them, however, are not entirely clear and only a detailed comparison of the evidence pertaining to the two particular categories may shed more light on this problem. Serving as court attendants, the status of *jəŋgi* is specified in a number of inscriptions as being that of 'king's slaves' (*hulun haji*), as, for example, in the Ngantang inscription issued by King Jayabhaya in 1135, in the Kemulan inscription issued in 1194, and in the Gunung Butak inscription issued in 1294 (Brandes 1913: 158, 175, 196). Strikingly, having the right to own black African slaves is represented in several inscriptions as a definite privilege. In the Simpang inscription, issued in 1030 by King Airlangga for the community of Baru, we learn that the elders are given a 'privilege to own as slaves ... black Africans and Negrito' (*vənayanya mahuluna ... jəŋgi pujut*). Obviously, this honour stemmed from the military assistance the villagers provided to the king, as specified in the text (Brandes 1913: 129–30). These inscriptions further strengthen the view that

²In most cases the beneficiary was a religious foundation enjoying royal or aristocratic patronage, often connected with the cult of royal ancestral figures. For the detailed discussion on the institution of *sīma*, see especially Naerssen (1941), and Barrett Jones (1984).

³Zoetmulder (1982: 749) glosses *watāk i jro* 'persons attached to the *kraton* (not a special group, but comprising all the various groups of court-attendants)'.

foreign slaves were considered in pre-Islamic Java to be in principal a private property of the king, unless specified otherwise.

Interestingly, black African slaves may also have become through such transfers a property of a religious institution. We gather this from the Keboan Pasar inscription, a late East Javanese copy of a grant dated to 1042, issued for the (Buddhist) establishment (*dharma*) of Gandhakuti. Among the privileges vested upon the members (*vaka*) of this religious establishment was the right ‘to dispose of female (prostitute?) slaves, black Africans, and Negritoes’ (*ahuluna dayan pujut jəŋgi*), apart from using certain textiles, ceremonial umbrellas, and other status symbols (Brandes 1913: 141). In India, the term *gandhakuṭī* (‘perfumed chamber’) referred to a private chamber reserved for the Buddha in monasteries, and Griffiths (2014: 216) has tentatively suggested that Old Javanese *gandhakuṭī* may have given rise to *kutī*, a word that in Old Javanese and Old Malay texts denotes commonly, though not exclusively, Buddhist monastery. It is tempting to speculate that Javanese Buddhists, and their laymen sponsors in particular, active in the international trade as they were, engaged in acquiring overland slaves, including black Africans. In view of the documented presence of black African slaves serving as crew on Arab-owned ships bound for China, it is also plausible that some of the African slaves served as well on board Javanese ships owned by the Buddhist laymen. As a meritorious deed, some of these human chattel may have been given as bonded persons to Buddhist establishments. Also, the administrative restrictions seem to point to other than just the utilitarian value of black Africans in ancient Java; rather than being just one of a number of servile categories, the *jəŋgi* are singled out as representing a valuable asset worth being regulated and protected by written edicts issued by rulers and other high-standing taxing authorities. We will see below that in ancient Java the symbolic aspects, in particular, were associated with exotic black Africans, and may have added to their social and economic value. In my view, this development should be viewed in the context of new trends in Javanese society, discernible in the 10th and 11th centuries, when rapid appropriations by a prosperous non-elite of goods and styles of the court seems to have provoked the development of sumptuary rules, expressed in terms of the privilege lists in charters (Wissemann Christie 1993: 195; Hoogervorst and Jákl forthcoming).

Similar to the practice documented from medieval China, black Africans were at first associated in Java with other, better known categories of dark-skinned people. In the Kancana inscription, issued in 860, *jəŋgi* are named together with a number of other servile groups. A category listed immediately before *jəŋgi* are *pujut*. Zoetmulder, who collected references to these people in Old Javanese inscriptions and literature, contends that the term *pujut* denotes dark-skinned Negritoes (Zoetmulder 1982: 1434). The *Dharma Pātañjala*, an Old Javanese Śaiva text, gives an intriguing description of *pujut*, listing them among the peoples ‘coming from overseas’ (Acri 2011: 209, 553). We can assume that the *pujut* came to Java probably as enslaved war captives, either from Sumatra or eastern parts of Indonesia. It is also plausible that the term covered the Papuans as well. The order of listing the *pujut* and *jəŋgi* in the Kancana inscription may suggest that exotic black Africans were classed in this early source as a sub-group of Negrito dark-skinned people with curly hair. In fact, the phrase *pujut jəŋgi* may be alternatively rendered as ‘*jəŋgi*, a sort of *pujut*’. This conceptual pattern would have its counterpart in early Chinese references to black Africans as part of a more general category of *kunlun* dark-skinned people (Wyatt 2010: 32), a problem I discuss later in this article.



It may also be significant that the term *jəŋgi* is very rare in the rich epigraphical corpus of the Central Javanese period (716–928), while references to *jəŋgi* became much more common in the 11th century and especially in the 12th century, exactly in the period when an increased number of black Africans shipped to China has been documented. In my view, a more visible presence of black Africans in Java from the 11th century onwards has led to a consistent discrimination between *pujut* and *jəŋgi* as two distinct categories listed in Old Javanese inscriptions. For example, in the inscription of Buru, issued in 1030, the phrase *jəŋgi pujut* clearly means ‘*jəŋgi* [and] *pujut*’ (Kern 1881: 36).

The *jəŋgi*, however, may not have been the only term used to denote black Africans in Old Javanese textual record; the presence of black Africans may be assumed even in the inscriptions in which they seem to be covered by the term *pavulunj-vulunj*. Intriguingly, in the inscriptions issued before the 11th century, this term is typically listed in the sequence of persons forbidden to enter the *sima* freehold exactly at the place where we later encounter the word *jəŋgi*. In the Sobhāmrta inscription, issued in 939 by King Sindok, we find *pavulunj-vulunj* listed at the place where the Kancana inscription discussed above lists *pujut jəŋgi*. This finding may indicate that *jəŋgi* were explicitly listed as forbidden from entering the *sima* freehold territory only in the inscriptions issued for the communities where black Africans were a relatively common sight, and their presence a potential nuisance.⁴ In other inscriptions black Africans and other dark-skinned peoples were simply covered by the umbrella-term *pavulunj-vulunj*. In other words, some parts of Java, and the coastal regions in particular, were more exposed to the presence of black Africans than the rest of the island.

Probably unsurprisingly, *jəŋgi* are nowhere named in the lists of foreigners, of which a number is known from Old Javanese inscriptions. In the earliest of these lists, in the Kaladi inscription issued in 840, the categories of foreigners include peoples from India and mainland Southeast Asia: *sījhā* (Sinhalese), *cēmpa* (Chams), *rōman* (Mons), *kāmir* (Khmers), and *karnake* (south Indians). In other inscriptions, additional categories of foreigners are mentioned, such as *cvalikā*, *gola*, *harya*, and *malyālā*, all referring to people from India. In the epigraphical record these names typically denote specific geographical areas and the inscriptions seem to refer to communities of merchants who came from these particular regions and whose numbers the inscriptions stipulate to curb or regulate. Another term, *kāliŋ*, can refer to Indians generally; according to Barrett Jones (1984: 25), *kliŋ* may occasionally be used as a general word for any foreigner. Sarkar (1969: 201) points out that restrictions on the numbers of foreigners indicate that there must have been large numbers of them. There has been an ongoing debate on the status of foreigners in pre-Islamic Java and Sumatra, with mostly unconvincing results.⁵ Barret Jones (1984: 25), for one, has suggested that the status of foreigners was generally relatively low, at least in Java in the 10th century, while Hall (2011) points at the important position of some foreigners in the Javanese tax system, clearly an indicator that at least some foreign traders enjoyed a relatively high social status, a pattern well documented from early modern Indonesia.

⁴I am grateful for the suggestion of one of my reviewers that black Africans, along with other unfortunate people such as mendicants and beggars, may have been forbidden from entering the religious freehold simply because they were considered a nuisance.

⁵See, for example, Naerssen (1941); Sarkar (1969); Barrett Jones (1984); Salmon (2003); Hall (2011).

What can we then say about the actual identity of black Africans in Java before 1500? Obviously, the black Africans who made it to the Indo-Malay world were of a different social status than foreign merchants who stayed temporarily or were settled in Java. The available evidence suggests that black Africans were invariably classed as sub-status, servile people, for whom the way back to their distant homeland was closed. They were certainly among the foreigners whose homeland was known to few in Java, even though seamen from the Indo-Malay archipelago reached Madagascar, and plausibly East African islands, as early as in the 7th to 8th centuries (Adelaar 2009: 159–70). The question ‘how did black Africans reach Java?’ has never been answered convincingly. In my view, three distinct possibilities arise. We can attribute most probably their presence in Java either to their being cast-offs of the far-reaching and prosperous Arab export of slaves from East Africa or their having been acquired and intentionally dispensed there as commodities of that trade in the first instance. These two possibilities have also been considered by Wyatt (2010) in the case of black Africans who made it to Song China.⁶ The third hypothesis of how black Africans ended up in Java, which has not been considered by historians so far, may link their arrival with those in Nusantara rather than Arab shipping; it must be considered at least a possibility that black Africans reached Sumatra and Java as human cargo through the same routes plied by Austronesian seamen since the beginning of the common era (Miller 1969: 155; Adelaar 2009).

In whichever way black Africans reached Java, they did not arrive as free people; the available evidence makes clear that most of them, if not all, had the status of slaves owned by the king or his close relatives. Speaking about ‘slaves’ in pre-Islamic Java, however, is not without its conceptual pitfalls. Slavery in pre-Islamic Java as a social institution has not been studied in detail, and the main problem in analysing epigraphical and literary evidence on slavery remains an ambiguity of Old Javanese terminology pertaining to unfree persons. The keyword *hulun* may be rendered in different contexts as ‘slave,’ ‘bondsman’, or simply ‘servant’ (Zoetmulder 1982: 649). This terminological opaqueness, in my view, reflects the fact that in pre-modern Java masters concerned themselves more with the maximisation of status than profit so that slavery, essentially a form of domination, was not recognised as conceptually different from other forms of unfree labour, such as debt peonage. By the early modern period, a specifically Islamic perspective regarding slavery may have introduced the concept of chattel slavery, changing the attitudes toward slave-holding in the Indo-Malay world (Clarence-Smith 2015). The term used to denote ‘slave’ in modern language, *budhak* (Robson and Singgih Wibisono 2002: 119), is not attested in Old Javanese. It represents a loanword from Malay, implying that by the early modern period the slave status was associated mostly with non-Javanese, plausibly non-Islamised war prisoners traded to Java. It has become accepted knowledge that since the 17th century, Islamised Java ceased to be a source of slaves (Reid 1983; Hall

⁶To pre-modern Chinese, dark-skinned people were known as *kunlun*, identified by many as denoting originally the Nusantaran dark-skinned seamen (Wyatt 2010), and only later applied to black Africans as well. Wilbur (1967: 92–3) has identified at least some *kunlun* with black Africans, claiming that ‘in (Tang) times some (*kunlun*) slaves may have been African negroes imported by Arab traders’. Wyatt (2010: 56) contends that these *kunlun* slaves, famous for their aquatic skills, were so important to the functioning of seagoing vessels they repaired that they lent their name to them. The *Lingwái Dàidà* by Zhou Qufei, published in 1163, shows an awareness of this traffic in African slaves. Writing of an undetermined sector of the East African coast, which the author calls *K'un-lun Ts'eng-chi*, he noted that ‘savages with lacquer-black bodies and fizzy hair were enticed by offers of food and then captured’ (Wheatley 1961: 54).

2011; Wisseman Christie 2009).⁷ These changing attitudes towards slaveholding are supported by the fact that in pre-Islamic period we hear next to nothing about freemen in the epigraphical record, and Old Javanese literature did not foster a critique of slavery as a social institution – a lacuna that may, however, reflect merely the chance nature of evidentiary survival. To summarise, though slavery certainly existed in Java before 1500 CE, it is only in the early modern period that slaves are conceptually distinguished from other forms of unfree labour.

Classed as the property of the king, further insight into the lives of black Africans can be gleaned from several inscriptions in which the *jøngi* figure among the *mayilala drvya haji*. Barrett Jones (1984: 138) identifies this category of royal servants as ‘people who claimed dues from others in a certain profession in villages, on a yearly or a half yearly basis’. Griffiths (2013: 68) renders the related term *kilalan* as ‘tax farmers’, pointing to its administrative and economic context. These people are always specified and long lists of them are given in some inscriptions. By way of example, 86 of the *mayilala drvya haji* are listed in the Barsahan inscription (908 CE), and 62 in Sangguran inscription (928 CE). In other epigraphical records only a few are mentioned; in the Taji Gunung inscription (910 CE), to give an example, only 11 are listed (Barrett Jones 1984: 137).⁸

The fact that black Africans were listed among those forbidden to enter religious freeholds is important as it suggests that at least some of them were not sequestered as court inmates and may have enjoyed relative mobility. The *mayilala drvya haji* had the permission of the king or other high-standing tax authority to collect the taxes and other payments, as can be deduced from the fact that freeholds needed tax authority exemption from paying to these ambulant collectors (Barrett Jones 1984: 138). What was the precise duty of black Africans who acted as part of the body of tax collectors? We do not know but it is tempting to speculate that – similar to parts of India and the Middle East – they worked as bodyguards or soldiers (Silva Jayasuriya 2008). Old Javanese inscriptions indicate that the *mayilala drvya haji* were unpopular and that freedom from their attention was a privilege and it may have been convenient to delegate the job to ‘different others,’ who were unrelated by kin, religion, or any other way to Javanese rural populations. Alternatively, black Africans may have served in troupes of travelling musicians and performers. The fact that *jøngis* are repeatedly forbidden to enter religious freeholds indicates their relatively common presence in parts of rural Java, and further supports a hypothesis advanced by Hall (1999: 213) that *sima* grants were ‘the centrepiece of the royal offensive’ against other secular landlords. As far as we know, black Africans were owned exclusively by Javanese rulers, other high-standing court figures, or by religious institutions established by them. Quite unexpectedly, Old Javanese evidence does not indicate that black Africans were concentrated in port enclaves, as was the case in Song China, but at Javanese courts, where they functioned, though not solely, as part of the tax-collecting body that claimed royal duties from rural populations.

⁷Even this view, however, is open to question. Some sources, such as Malay *Syair Dang Sarat*, speak about Javanese female slaves traded to Patani in the 18th century. Javanese slaves are known as late as in 1823 in Singapore, though the vast majority of city's slave population by that time were Balinese (Braginsky 2006: 4–5).

⁸Black Africans are listed as an element of an administrative body of tax farmers, for example, in the Plumbangan inscription, issued in 1120 for the religious freehold (*sima*) established at the part of this large settlement (Brandes 1913: 161).

Black Africans in Javanese courts: literary reflections

Important evidence pertaining to the social status and position of black Africans at Javanese courts of pre-Islamic period can be gleaned from the *Sumanasāntaka* and *Kṛṣṇāyana*, two narrative poems composed in the 13th century in the literary register of Old Javanese (*kakavin*). Representing literary fiction, the relationship of Old Javanese *kakavin* to the realities of Javanese life has always been contentious. Scholars, however, have developed strategies on how to read the court poetry profitably as a source of cultural and social history of ancient Java (Supomo 2001; Creese 2004). Recently, Worsley (2012: 167) has argued that rather than fiction, *kakavin* represented for ancient audiences a work of ‘hyper-reality’, in which ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ elements join to represent Java’s past. The imagery pertaining to black Africans represented in Old Javanese poetry clearly reflect daily realities faced by the *jəŋgi* in pre-Islamic Java, though set in the epic context. The first two passages analysed are taken from the *Sumanasāntaka*, a *kakavin* composed by Mpu Monaguṇa shortly after 1200 CE (Zoetmulder 1974; Worsley et al. 2013). In stanza 141.15 black Africans figure as servants of princess Indumatī, forming part of her entourage. They are entrusted with carrying her personal belongings at the occasion of her moving house from the court at Vidarbha to the court of her husband, Prince Āja, in Ayodhyā:

*devī sira mayutus anijka-niŋkah i sadṛyya nira pinahayu
norāhala-hala kalaśā tinon kinajayan vinalunan ahaləp
akeh papiku-pikul irāpupul kavula dāsa kaliliran ira
bonḍan sajuru lavan ikaŋ pujut sajuru jəŋgi sajuru humadāy*

(Old Javanese text from Worsley et al. 2013: 336)

The princess gave instructions that all her possessions were to be packed tidily.

None were unsightly on the mat, but protected neatly by cushions and cloth.

Many porters gathered there, all her inherited servants and slaves:

Units of Papuans, Negritos and black Africans standing ready.⁹

The black Africans, listed here together with other servile groups of dark-skinned people, are represented in this passage as slaves, the status ascribed to them also in the inscriptive record discussed above. This social status is indicated by the Sanskrit loanword *dāsa*, used in Old Javanese as one of the less ambiguous words to denote enslaved people.¹⁰ In the preceding stanza 141.14 we learn that these sub-status people were part of a wider category of unfree people, denoted by the native term *hulun*, referring in Old Javanese to slaves as well as bondsmen (Zoetmulder 1982: 649). The Sanskrit loanword *dāsa*, uncommon in Old Javanese literary sources, may have denoted in particular slave outlanders, enslaved men and women shipped to Java from other parts of Indonesia as well as from more distant lands. Interestingly, the passage indicates that black Africans serving at Javanese pre-Islamic courts, similar to other servile groups, were organised in units (*jəŋgi sajuru*), led by a ‘chief’ (*juru*). In Old Javanese *juru* denotes a head of an administrative or military unit, as well as of a professional group of producers, servants,

⁹All translations are mine if not stated otherwise.

¹⁰The word *dāsa* is commonly rendered in Sanskrit, but also Prakrit and Pali sources, as ‘slave,’ usually without distinguishing between the slavery and bondage (Chakravarti 1985: 35; Schopen 2010). By the Gupta period, however, the category of *dāsa* consisted mainly of domestic servants (Bongert 1963; Chakravarti 1985: 54).



and merchants (such as butchers, cooks, ferrymen). We learn next to nothing about the chiefs of African slaves, but from rare evidence we have on the status of other *juru* we may presume that these personnel enjoyed a relative autonomy and exercised direct power over other members of units they headed. The passage also informs us that heavy physical work, such as carrying loads, was among the occupation black Africans were engaged in Java; this is in full conformity with what we know about the tasks black Africans performed in Song China, as we will see in the next part of this article.

The passage also informs us that the whole unit of these African slaves were followers (*kavula*) of Princess Indumati, and represented her personal property (*kaliliranira*), rather than a property of the king or state. The same arrangement is attested from medieval India, where, occasionally, ‘hundreds of slave girls formed part of the dowry of rich brides and accompanied them to their new homes’ (Chakravarti 1985: 59). The *Sumanasāntaka* testifies to the practice, much better attested from early modern Indonesia, that a number of personal followers, mostly of servile status, accompanied their lords and ladies when they moved to another court (Creese 2004). The term *kaliliran*, meaning in Old Javanese ‘inheritance, heirloom’ (Zoetmulder 1982: 777), and used here to refer to African slaves, actually suggests that dark-skinned slaves represented a category of servile people passed on to Indumati, plausibly by her parents. In parallel with Old Javanese inscriptive record, black Africans are listed in the stanza quoted above along two other classes of dark-skinned people, the *bondan* and *pujut*, about whom we know even less than about the *jenggi*, and my translation of these terms should be considered to be preliminary. The little we know is that these men and women represented segments of the sub-status population, demonstrated in Javanese historical record as early as the 9th century; the category of *pujut* seems to have covered enslaved dark-skinned Indo-Malay Negrito. For *bondan*, a category known almost exclusively from an epigraphical record, Zoetmulder (1982: 251) advanced an educated guess, glossing the term ‘a category of servants (slaves?), perhaps Papuan’. Obviously, Old Javanese records do not allow any neat categorisation of these terms along the lines of ethnicity.¹¹

The *Sumanasāntaka* represents dark-skinned slaves serving as porters and carriers (*papiku-pikul*), a description which seems to refer to adult males. Though a great number of ethnic Javanese were employed as carriers of heavy burdens, the passage clearly conveys a belief that black Africans, depicted as endowed with great physical strength, were particularly fit and suitable to undertake heavy, physically extracting labour. Black Africans are represented in a very similar way in Song China, as we will see later in this article. Worsley et al. (2013: 337) render the plural form *papikul-pikul* as ‘porters;’ the passage, however, may reflect as well an aspect of ‘otherness’ ascribed to black Africans, and generally to dark-skinned sub-status people in pre-modern Java. In my view, exotic carriers depicted in *Sumanasāntaka* 141.15 may well represent palanquin-bearers, adding an opulence to important persons in Indumati’s entourage or to Indumati herself. Though Javanese word *pikul* commonly denotes a ‘long pole carried over one shoulder with carrying baskets suspended fore and aft’ (Robson and Singgih Wibisono 2002: 569), its Old Javanese counterpart has a much wider meaning, covering

¹¹The same pertains to the *nambi*, another poorly known category of sub-status people. They are listed alongside black Africans in the *Dharma Pātañjala* (Acri 2011: 209, 553). I am grateful for this suggestion from one of my anonymous reviewers.

(apart from a carrying-pole) also poles of palanquins, biers, and stretchers.¹² It is well known that physically conspicuous figures, including dwarfs and hunchbacks, were a common sight at Javanese and Balinese courts, where they were perceived as magically powerful characters, apart from representing exotic elements in the cosmopolitan environment. One passage in the *Kṛṣṇāyana* indicates that Javanese pre-Islamic courts may have been actively involved in the acquisition of physically conspicuous figures: ‘There were hunchbacks and dwarves who seem to have stepped from a painting, even an albino and a dwarf hunchback, recently found to complete the set’ (Creese 2004: 48).¹³ Scholars generally believe that one of the functions of these men and women in pre-modern Java was to enhance the social status of their masters (Creese 2004: 54). We may assume that in pre-Islamic Javanese courts black Africans figured among these ‘different others,’ and were appreciated for their physical strength as well as valued as spiritually powerful beings.

The second passage in the *Sumanasāntaka* that gives us an insight into the social position of black Africans depicts a festive procession of Prince Aja and Princess Indumatī approaching a *paprasan* pavilion to undergo a *pras* ritual as part of their wedding ceremony:

*payuŋ putih rva-rva manimbarjī sira
parəŋ lumampah tan adoh padāŋjadəg
pujut lavan jəŋgi rarāmaवाहिरəŋ
baŋun graha rva-rva padāŋgayar vulan*

(*Sumanasāntaka* 112.8; Old Javanese text from Worsley et al. 2013: 296)

Two white umbrellas flanked them

As they walked the short way together before coming to a halt.

The umbrella-carriers were dark-skinned girls, one a *pujut* and the other an African;
They were like two planets accompanying the moon.

The black African maiden, entrusted with carrying one of the two ceremonial parasols, is undoubtedly a member of the servile ‘unit of Africans’ discussed in some detail earlier. The text identifies this African slave as *rara*, a young girl, giving us an interesting piece of information that very young girls, probably born in Java, were part of the local African community. Sources on black Africans in Chinese Guangzhou are silent on the presence of females in the community, and the importance of Old Javanese source thus cannot be overstated as it is the first explicit reference to the presence of young African women in Southeast Asia. Worsley et al. (2013: 496) have suggested in their recent edition of the *Sumanasāntaka* – in my view correctly – that the servants actually walked in pairs, ‘each pair carrying an item of regalia’. We see that the African girl, as well as her Negrito counterpart, are very much intended as a repository of colour: the contrast between the spotlessly white parasols and dark-skinned maidens is calculated. Two dark-skinned girls are represented as part of a cosmic theatre where they figure as ‘two planets accompanying the moon’. Needless to say, the moon in question is represented by Princess Indumatī herself, whose very name (*indu*: ‘the moon’) points in this way. The *Sumanasāntaka*, aimed at the court audience, represents black Africans as a valuable

¹²See, for example, *Sārasamuccaya* 363.2: ‘carrying stretchers’ (*mamikul usujan*); *Deśavarṇana* 84.1: ‘carried in the palanquin’ (*pinikul in jampaṇa*).

¹³*Kṛṣṇāyana* 10.4.



asset rather than grotesque outlanders: Java of the Kediri period (1049–1222 CE), at the end of which the poem was composed, was indeed renowned for what scholars have long contended was a highly cosmopolitan outlook, one that obviously incorporated with relative tolerance all varieties of people (Wisseman Christie 1999). Another reference to a black African in Old Javanese literature is affirmed in the *Kṛṣṇāyana*, a poem composed probably at the first half of the 13th century (Zoetmulder 1974; Creese 2004: 10). In stanza 35.10 the poet introduces personal servants of a princess:

*ceti rvaj siki vāhvyanaykil arjāharapakna vagəd riŋ ingita
lavan jangri rare marak rəsap amanku sədah asila tan salah bhāva*
(Old Javanese text from Soewito Santoso 1986: 165)

The two hand-maidens, serving on the princess, were facing each other, both very good at understanding internal intentions,

And a black African girl waited upon the princess with a betel-set on her lap, sitting politely in faultless attitude.

The passage confirms a presence of black Africans in the environment of the inner court servants, and strengthens our view that restricted numbers of them may have been socially less marginal than scholars commonly assume. Creese (2004: 54–55) was the first who noted the importance of this passage for the cultural history of Java, observing: ‘The bearer of the betel box was usually the most favoured royal retainer in the immediate household of a prince or princess. Apparently even those who came from distant parts of the world could rise to this most privileged of positions at court.’ Though both the *Sumanasāntaka* and *Kṛṣṇāyana* represent literary fiction, we can be sufficiently confident that the texts reflect the past presence of black Africans at Javanese courts in the 13th century; not only is the presence of African slaves documented in the epigraphical sources, but the literary motif of black African servants is found nowhere in Sanskrit epics and *kāvya* poetry, two sources that much influenced Old Javanese literature. Supomo (2001) has demonstrated that when a particular literary motif known from *kakavin* is not attested in Sanskrit literary prose and poetry, there is a high probability it represents an innovation of its Javanese author. We will never know with certainty what were the actual reasons behind the presence of black African men and women at Javanese pre-Islamic inner courts, but we may surmise that their presence there was driven by symbolic and possibly ritual meanings ascribed to them, as well as by more mundane merits of their service.

Javanese black Africans in the global context

Old Javanese sources discussed in some detail above indicate that pre-Islamic Java was home to a relatively small, but not insignificant, community of black Africans, men as well as women. Apart from the Song China, Java represents the only other region east of Persia from where we have evidence, though fragmentary, about the presence of black Africans before 1500 CE. This inevitably invites a question: how do Javanese data sit with the incomparably richer Chinese evidence? Though the data show that black Africans in China and Java were subject to similar stereotypical representations, their lives seem to have followed different trajectories. Most importantly, Old Javanese sources indicate that black Africans in Java were not confined to one port-city, as was the case of the

African community in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. The inscriptions discussed above testify that at least some *jəŋgi* enjoyed a relative, though certainly restricted, mobility. As part of the body of the collectors of royal fees, black Africans would enter rural settlements, some located at a substantial distance from the royal court.

In China, references to dark-skinned slaves go back to early times, long before the first black Africans arrived. Waley-Cohen (1999: 25) asserts that the Chinese have often used the designation ‘black’ to refer to slaves of ‘Malay’ origin, the *kunlun* of Chinese accounts. Hall (1999: 186) claims that ‘Malay (Kunlun) sailors were known in China by the third century BC.’ The available evidence indicates that Southeast Asian seagoing populations were responsible for opening the entire sea route from India to China (Wolters 1967: 154), and it is thus plausible that the same seamen may have participated in the slave trade with China. The first African slaves, however, reached China only by the Tang period (618–907), and it is assumed that they were imported there by Arab traders (Wilbur 1967: 92–3). During this period China still lacked a name for Africa and for African slaves (Wyatt 2010: 132). Intriguingly, in the loanword *jəŋgi* the Javanese acquired a name for black Africans probably slightly earlier than did the Chinese. During the Tang period, a vibrant maritime economy had developed that was centred primarily on the port city of Guangzhou (Heng 2008: 1). Products from Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean littoral, and the Arabian peninsula were imported through the Chinese ports. Though Arab shipping to China has been documented in the textual record from the early Tang period (Wink 1991; Abramson 2008), a recent spectacular salvage of the Belitung wreck, a 9th-century ship of Arab construction carrying Chinese merchandise, represents the first inconclusive evidence of direct Arab trade with China (Flecker 2011: 111). We know that at approximately the same period the Tang court sought to create an environment conducive to the smooth conduct of international trade at its ports, undertaking a number of measures to secure the welfare of foreign traders who arrived annually at these ports (Wang 1998: 96). By the late Tang dynasty, then, a sizeable community of foreign traders stayed at Guangzhou, encompassing Persians, Singhalese, Malays and other traders from Nusantara (Schafer 1963: 15).

What was the position and social status of black-bodied sojourners in this cosmopolitan port? How visible were they? Chinese evidence, though relatively rich, defies an easy explanation and is interpreted differently by scholars. Snow (1988: 18), for one, has argued for a nearly ubiquitous visibility of black slaves, so common that ‘the Chinese residents of Canton (Guangzhou) must have seen them daily’. A similar view has been expressed by Chaffee (2006: 406–7), who asserts that there was considerable dynamism and a tendency towards integration between foreign communities and local Chinese. Heng (2008: 33), on the other hand, argues that whereas there was no strict prohibition against interaction between Guangzhou’s outlanders and Chinese, there was no real ‘process of integration’ between them. A similar view has been advanced recently in a masterful study by Wyatt (2010: 59), who claims that most black Africans in medieval China were owned by Chinese rather than Arabs, and their presence as servants was restricted to the port enclave. Probably the most important Chinese source testifying to the presence of dark-skinned Africans in Song China is the *Pingzhou ketan* (‘Pingzhou chats on things worthwhile’), a short work by a scholar and minor official Zhu Yu, written most probably in 1119 CE, speaking in the voice of his father Zhu Fu, so that the text actually describes events of the late 11th century (Wyatt 2010: 47). Drawing extensively on this source,



Wyatt has offered a vivid picture of 11th-century Guangzhou's black slaves. One particular passage in the *Pingzhou ketan* immediately reminds us of an aspect of physical fitness associated with black Africans also in Old Javanese poetry discussed above:

The wealthy in Guang(zhou) maintain numerous foreign slaves. These slaves are unequalled in strength and are capable of carrying – on their backs – several hundred catties (*jin*). Neither their language nor their passions bear any connection to ours. ... As for the color of these slaves, it is black as ink. Their lips are red and their teeth are white. Their hair is curly.

(Wyatt 2010: 56)

The capability of these men for lifting heavy objects has been associated by Wyatt (2010: 57) with a seaward or dockyard function. Wyatt (2010: 55) also identifies these men with the *guinu* employed on the ships and described in some detail on another place in the *Pingzhou ketan*:

At the sea, there is no dreading of wind or billows. The only fear is hearing from the tower, when attempting to moor, that they are about to run aground in shallows. If they cannot succeed in throwing off (ballast), the ship suddenly springs leaks and there is no way of entering below and managing it. (At such times,) they order their foreign slaves (*guinu*) to repair the ship from the outside by using knives to plug the leaks with wadding. The foreign slaves are good at swimming; they enter water that is murky.

The remarkable aspect of black Africans' service on seagoing ships, though predictable, is not confirmed in Old Javanese epigraphical or literary evidence. In fact, Javanese data on the presence of *jøngi* on ships, and in coastal enclaves, is very limited, while in China it represents most of the available evidence pertaining to black Africans. Since the 11th century, Chinese ships made voyages to Southeast Asia and India on a regular basis (Hall 2011: 45), and a number of scholars have noted the presence of dark-skinned crew on Chinese and foreign ships. Jung-pang Lo (1955: 500) states that Chinese vessels of the 11th to 12th centuries could afford 'the service of negro stewards', and Wyatt (2010: 57) observes that dark-skinned slaves 'did likely serve on board Chinese as well as Arab ships as a kind of subclass and that – specifically in the Arab case – they could then be jettisoned, disposed of at Guangzhou, Quanzhou, or other Chinese ports of call according to need and convenience'. Wyatt supports his hypothesis of black Africans 'jettisoned' at ports by their masters by pointing to a virtual absence of any Chinese historical references proving the existence of native markets for slaves.

Representing a hub of Chinese southeast-coastal shipping at least since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the importance of Guangzhou increased significantly in 971 CE when the city was officially decreed open to inter-state commerce and many foreign traders started to settle there (Roberts 2006: 30). Scholars have suggested that this sizeable community of outlanders may have numbered in the tens of thousands amid Guangzhou's total population of some two hundred thousand (Wyatt 2010: 50). In China of the Song period, posits Wyatt (2010: 43), black Africans were by no means geographically dispersed across a number of coastal regions, but constituted 'more clusters or groupings of discrete individuals than real colonies ... preponderantly aggregated in only one place, what was already by then the populous coastal locality of Guangzhou'. Derek Heng (2008: 29–30) has demonstrated that by the beginning of the 12th century CE the composition of Guangzhou's foreign population shifted from being mainly Arab and Indian to

being predominantly Southeast Asian, consisting of such groups as Javanese, (Śrīvijayan) Malays, and Chams. At the same time, the foreign community became, according to Heng (2008: 28), increasingly more status-conscious and hierarchical. In the 13th century, further political changes led to an increased flow of Muslim traders (Chen and Lombard 1988: 24–9). It is probably not coincidental, that by the 14th century, black Africans became less visible in Chinese, as well as in Javanese historical record; they might have been Islamised by that period, their original identity ‘disappearing’ among the increasingly expanding Muslim community.

The early modern evidence for Africans in the Indo-Malay world has yet to be collected and analysed so that we must admit to remaining ignorant of Java’s Africans during this transitional period from their pre-modern to their modern Indonesian experiences. Javanese experience of black Africans ultimately became much mediated by Europeans who came to Java, with their black slaves in tow. Clearly, Javanese interaction with its black Africans was always limited because of the small numbers of representatives. Though these numbers may well have ebbed during the early-modern period, the interaction did not cease. No matter how marginalised, black Africans continued to exert influence on Indonesian mental consciousness. In parts of Indonesia, such as in Sumatra, Java, Bali, and Sulawesi, black Africans figure since the early modern period as prodigies of immense physical strength. To give one example of this (mostly unstudied) lore, among the Minangkabau in the 18th century, the spear Lambing Lambuara, embellished with the beard of a mysterious Zanggi, was part of the royal regalia (Braginsky 2015: 101). A modern chapter in the sojourn of black Africans in Indonesia started to evolve in the mid 19th century, when Ghanaian soldiers recruited by the Dutch in Africa were garrisoned in Java. Some of them remained in Indonesia until 1955 when they were forced to leave. Their presence, however, left a long-lasting imprint on Javanese cultural memory, as commendably demonstrated by van Kessel (2005) in her study of this black African community, whose members might have been completely unaware that their compatriots arrived in Java as early as the 9th century during the heyday of the Mataram kingdom, at the time Borobudur and Prambanan were newly completed monuments.

Conclusion

We may summarise that black Africans arrived in Java mainly during the 10th to 13th centuries, most probably as rejects of Arab slave export to Song China. In this period Song China represented the greatest market for Java, trading its goods for silks, porcelain, and Chinese copper cash (Wisseman Christie 1999; Lieberman 2009: 791). Most of this trade passed through a limited number of port enclaves in Sumatra and Java, and a number of major port cities on the southeast coast of China, particularly Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Fuzhou. Heng (2008: 22) observes that during the late Northern Song period, the key groups of Guangzhou foreigners were represented by the Malays, operating under the auspices of Śrīvijaya, the Chams, and the Javanese. It is in this context of the trade with cosmopolitan China that we must envisage black Africans arriving in Java, though a direct sailing to Madagascar and East African islands from Nusantara may have represented an alternative route of how black Africans reached Java. Evidence from contemporary China suggests that Arab slave traffickers functioned as facilitators of contact with Africa. We may attribute the presence of dark-skinned Africans in Java

(and other parts of Indo-Malay world), either to their being cast-offs of the far-reaching Arab slave export from East Africa, or to their having been acquired and sold there as commodities of that trade in the first place. Once revealed to have existed at all, Java's verifiable though obscure black Africans command our attention today, not as mere historical curiosity, but for expanding our view of world history.

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